

Commanders and Scientific Labourers: Nietzsche on the Relationship between Philosophy and Science

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I. Introduction

I venture to speak out against an unseemly and harmful shift in the respective ranks of science and philosophy [... Science] now aims with an excess of high spirits and a lack of understanding to lay down laws for philosophy and to play the 'master' herself — what am I saying? the *philosopher*. [...]

Finally: how could it really be otherwise? Science is flourishing today and her good conscience is written all over her face, while the level to which all modern philosophy has gradually sunk [...] invites mistrust and displeasure, if not mockery and pity. Philosophy reduced to 'theory of knowledge', in fact no more than a timid epochism and doctrine of abstinence [...] How could such a philosophy — *dominate!* (*BGE* Part VI: 'We Scholars', section 204 [1886])

- Nietzsche is ambivalent about science in his later works (1886–1888):
 - He makes approving remarks about its findings, its rigorous empiricist methodology (*TI* III, 3), its intellectual integrity (*A* 47) and spirit of adventurousness (*GS* 293)*
 - But he also casts doubt on the motivation and value of the 'unconditional will to truth' behind science (*GS* 344, *GM* III) and rebukes its overreach (*BGE* 204; *GS* 373)
- Q: What does Nietzsche think science is *good for*?
A: Science is an important tool for philosophers in the project of *creating values*.
- The philosopher's task of *value-creation* involves two steps:
 - (1) Envision the ideals that human society should realise
 - (2) Turn the ideals into prescriptions for behaviour and societal organisation
- Philosophers need information from scientists to accomplish step (2)

II. Philosophers as Value-Creators

- The primary task of philosophers is *not* seeking knowledge, though many of the 'preconditions of [their] task' (*BGE* 211) are knowledge-related:
 - Experience with rigorous scientific practice (*BGE* 211)
 - First-hand experience of 'the whole range of human values and value feelings' (*BGE* 211; cf. *GS* 380, 382)
 - A critical and sceptical spirit (*BGE* 209–210)

Genuine philosophers [...] are commanders and legislators: they say, 'thus it shall be!' They first determine the Whither and For What of man [...] Their 'knowing' is creating, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is — will to power. (BGE 211)

* Guide to text abbreviations: *A* = *The Antichrist*; *BGE* = *Beyond Good and Evil*; *GM* = *On the Genealogy of Morality*; *GS* = *The Gay Science*; *TI* = *Twilight of the Idols*; *WP* = *The Will to Power*; *Z* = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

- Two kinds of purported “philosophers”:
 - (1) ‘Hodge-podge philosophers [...] “philosophers of reality” or “positivists”’ (*BGE* 204)
 - E.g., Eugen Dühring; mid-19th century materialists (Moleschott, Büchner, Vogt)
 - Take the deliverances of natural science as incontestable truth about reality; regard philosophy as subservient and answerable to science
 - (2) ‘Philosophical labourers after the noble model of Kant and Hegel’ (*BGE* 211)
 - They ‘press into formulas [...] former value-*positings*, value-creations, which have become dominant and are for a time called “truths”’ (*BGE* 211)
 - Useful to philosophers because they distil value systems into their core principles

III. Setting Goals for Scientists

Something for the industrious. — Anyone who now wishes to make a study of moral matters opens up for himself an immense field for work. [...] Where could you find a history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of pious respect for tradition, or of cruelty? [...] Has anyone made a study of different ways of dividing up the day or of the consequences of a regular schedule of work, festivals, and rest? What is known of the moral effects of different foods? [...] The most industrious people will find that it involves too much work simply to observe how differently men’s instincts have grown, and might yet grow, depending on different moral climates. [...] It would require whole generations [...] of scholars who would collaborate systematically, to exhaust the points of view and the material [...]

If all these jobs were done, the most insidious question of all would emerge [...]: whether science can furnish goals of action after it has shown that it can take such goals away and annihilate them [...]

(*GS* 7 [1882])

- Philosophers set goals and assign scientists to figure out how to achieve them
- Questions for cultural and material historians, anthropologists, psychologists, physiologists: how are (a) individual health and (b) cultural production affected by various...
 - Customs and ways of life: diet, work schedule, living arrangements, etc. (*GS* 7)?
 - Forms of social and political organisation: hierarchical vs. egalitarian, authoritarian vs. democratic (*BGE* 202–3, 257)?
 - Religious creeds, practices, and attitudes (*BGE* 45)?
 - Basic values revered in society: honour, compassion, freedom, truth... (*GS* 7; *BGE* 211)?
- By 1887, Nietzsche has answered ‘the most insidious question’ (*GS* 7) with a ‘No’: science cannot *set ends*, i.e., tell you what you should value; it can only discover cause–effect relationships that can be turned into means–ends prescriptions *if you already have a goal*
 - Science ‘first requires [...] an ideal of value, a value-creating power, in the *service* of which it could *believe* in itself — it never creates values’ (*GM* III, 25)
 - ‘the ascertaining of facts [...] is fundamentally different from creative positing, from forming, shaping, overcoming, willing, such as is of the essence of philosophy’ (*KSA* 12:9[48]/ *WP* 605)
 - ‘[A] philosophy, a “faith”, must always be there first of all, so that science can acquire from it a direction, a meaning, a limit, a method, a *right* to exist’ (*GM* III, 24)

- Science pursued purely for the sake of knowledge or truth is not science setting its own goal or providing its own foundation: it is science guided by the *philosophical* view that truth is supremely valuable (‘the unconditional will to truth’)

I take the opportunity provided by this treatise to express publicly and formally a desire [...] that some philosophical faculty might advance *historical studies of morality* through a series of academic prize-essays — perhaps this book will serve as a powerful impetus in this direction. [...] I suggest the following question: it deserves the attention of philologists and historians as well as that of professional philosophical scholars:

‘What light does linguistics, and especially the study of etymology, throw on the history of the evolution of moral concepts?’

[...]it is equally necessary to engage the interest of physiologists and doctors [...] The question: what is the *value* of this or that table of values and ‘morality’? should be viewed from the most divers perspectives; for the problem ‘value *for what?*’ cannot be examined too subtly. Something, for example, that possessed obvious value in relation to the longest possible survival of a race [...] would by no means possess the same value if it were a question, for instance, of producing a stronger type. The well-being of the majority and the well-being of the few are opposite value-viewpoints: to consider the former *a priori* of higher value may be left to the naïveté of English biologists. — *All* the sciences have from now on to prepare the way for the future task of the philosophers: [...] the solution of the *problem of value*, the determination of the *rank-ordering of values*. (GM I, Note [1887])

- Scientists or ‘scholars’ are not qualified to make value judgments; they just reflect the dominant morality of the surrounding culture, which they think answers all value questions

It follows from the laws of rank-ordering that scholars, insofar as they belong to the spiritual middle class, can never catch sight of the really great problems and question marks; moreover, their courage and their eyes simply do not reach that far — and above all [...], their inmost assumptions and desires that things might be such and such, their fears and hopes all come to rest and are satisfied too soon. Take, for example, that pedantic Englishman, Herbert Spencer. What makes him ‘enthuse’ in his way and then leads him to draw a line of hope, a horizon of desirability — that eventual reconciliation of ‘egoism and altruism’ about which he raves — almost nauseates the likes of us [...] (GS 373)

IV. Nietzsche: Philosopher or Scientist?

- What kind of ‘impetus’ for ‘historical studies of morality’ is *On the Genealogy of Morality*: a scientific exemplar or a philosophical programmatic prologue?
- Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (2002): Nietzsche is a ‘methodological naturalist’, whose methods are continuous with those of the natural sciences
 - ‘Nietzsche, the philosophical naturalist, aims to offer theories that explain various important human phenomena [...] in ways that [...] are *modelled* on science in the sense that they seek to reveal the causal determinants of these phenomena, typically in various physiological and psychological facts about persons’ (Leiter 2002, p. 8)

- Paul Loeb, ‘Genuine Philosophers, Value-Creation, and Will to Power’ (2019): Nietzsche regards himself as ‘a philosophical labourer along the lines of Kant and Hegel’ (p. 95), ‘investigating, comparing, explaining, abbreviating, and codifying [...] past values [...] as a kind of preparatory service to some future genuine philosopher’ (p. 96)
- Problems with Leiter’s assessment:
 - The historical accounts in, e.g., the *Genealogy* and *The Antichrist* are painted in broad strokes over large timescales, with little in the way of detail or citations
 - They are also punctuated with value judgments, which Nietzsche thinks are out of the purview of science
- Nietzsche can be seen as performing two tasks distinctive of *philosophers*:
 - Critical/evaluative: ‘being the bad conscience of their time’, ‘applying the knife vivisectionally to the chest of the very *virtues of their time*’ (*BGE* 212)
 - Epistemic: breadth of perspective — understanding a variety of value-perspectives (*BGE* 211; *GM* III, 12); taking in and interpreting vast expanses of time and space (*GS* 380)

It may be necessary for the education of a genuine philosopher that he himself has also once stood upon all these steps on which his servants, the scientific labourers of philosophy, remain standing [...] Perhaps he himself must have been critic and sceptic and dogmatist and historian and also poet and collector and traveller and solver of riddles and moralist and seer and ‘free spirit’ and almost everything in order to pass through the whole range of human values and value feelings and to be *able* to see with many different eyes and consciences, from a height and into every distance, from the depths into every height, from a nook into every expanse. (*BGE* 211)

If one would like to see our European morality for once as it looks from a distance, and [...] measure it against other moralities, past and future, then one has to proceed like a wanderer who wants to know how high the towers in a town are: he *leaves* the town. ‘Thoughts about moral prejudices’, if they are not meant to be prejudices about prejudices, presuppose a position *outside* morality, some point beyond good and evil to which one has to rise, climb, or fly [...] the question is whether one really *can* get up there. [...] One has to be *very light* to drive one’s will to knowledge into such a distance and [...] to create for oneself eyes to survey millennia [...] (*GS* 380)

V. Interpretive Pointers and the Autonomy of Science

- Philosophers don’t *dictate* the results scientists come up with; it’s in their interests to have an accurate account of cause–effect relationships
- Philosophers *can re-interpret* scientific results to better accord with their moral and aesthetic worldview, if it doesn’t interfere with (or even improves) predictive accuracy
- Examples of such re-interpretation from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Physiologists should think before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being. A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength — life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*.

In short, here as everywhere else, let us beware of *superfluous* teleological principles — one of which is the instinct of self-preservation [...] Thus method, which must be essentially economy of principles, demands it. (*BGE* 13)

[...] ‘nature’s conformity to law’, of which you physicists talk so proudly [...] — why, it exists only owing to your interpretation and bad ‘philology’. It is no matter of fact, no ‘text’, but rather only a naively humanitarian emendation and perversion of meaning, with which you make abundant concessions to the democratic instincts of the modern soul! ‘Everywhere equality before the law; nature is no different in that respect’ [...] But as said above, that is interpretation, not text; and somebody might come along who, with opposite intentions and modes of interpretation, could read out of the same ‘nature’, and with regard to the same phenomena, rather the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of claims of power [...] but he might, nevertheless, end by asserting the same about this world as you do, namely, that it has a ‘necessary’ and ‘calculable’ course, *not* because laws obtain in it, but because they are absolutely *lacking*, and every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment. (BGE 22)

- *Will to power*: (roughly) the desire, impulse, or tendency to overcome resistance in order to change the world in some distinctive way, to leave a lasting mark
 - Biology: success for a species consists in its ‘self-overcoming’, its replacement by an ever-evolving lineage, rather than survival in the same form (cf. GM I, Note)
 - Physics: instead of intrinsically inert matter governed by transcendent laws of nature, there are *centres of force* that exert quanta of power

To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength [...] is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength. A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect — more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language [...], which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a ‘subject’, can it appear otherwise. For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for [...] the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. (GM I, 13)

- Science *can* arrive at results of great theoretical and practical import without instruction from philosophers, based purely on epistemic considerations (e.g., BGE 12), but this is a lucky accident when it happens

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